

the global

# SEAFARER



[nautilusfederation.org](http://nautilusfederation.org)

March /  
April 2026

Wherever you are, so are we

Volume 10 | Issue 1



## Join the Ocean Cleanup movement!

Catch our new podcast on how  
seafarers can tackle plastic pollution

**03** **ABANDONMENT**  
New figures  
from  
the ITF

**18** **SAFER WAVES**  
Breaking the  
silence on sexual  
harassment

**20** **MEN'S HEALTH**  
Physical and  
mental health  
considered

**22** **JUST SAY NO**  
ITF non-  
seafarers'  
work clause



08



20



05

Published by  
Nautilus International  
on behalf of



Nautilus Federation director  
Mark Dickinson MSc (Econ)

Nautilus Federation  
coordinator  
Danny McGowan

Editor:  
Helen Kelly

Communications manager:  
Rob Coston

Senior journalist:  
Sarah Robinson

Production editor:  
June Cattini-Walker

Web editor:  
Deborah McPherson



nautilusfederation.org

## ● The big issue

- 8 WHY INVESTIGATIVE FAILURES PUT US ALL AT RISK**  
Life-changing injuries to seafarer whilst unlashng cargo at the Port of Liverpool, ITF investigates

## ● Special report

- 12 STILL SLEEPLESS AT SEA**  
Latest data from health study by SIRC at Cardiff University indicates fatigue has reached a crisis level, particularly in the cruise sector, with decent food and healthcare inadequate
- 15 BETTER DATA COLLECTION FOR BETTER HEALTH**  
Solent University aims to fill the data gap in seafarers' health with a new toolbox that crew can use onboard ship
- 18 BREAKING THE SILENCE ON SHIPPING'S SEXUAL OFFENCES**  
University of Winchester has gathered evidence indicating the extent of the industry's problem with assaults and harassment

## ● In focus

- 4 MAIB 2025 DATA**  
Shows persistent risk of accidents across the maritime sector
- 5 THE GARBAGE MEN OF THE SEA**  
**PODCAST:** How you as a seafarer can help rid the world's oceans of plastic

## ● Industry info

- 2 FEDERATION NEWS**  
River cruise crew secure better protection with new CBA



15

Unions demand flag state action on abandonment crisis  
NautilusTV wins at TUC Comms Awards

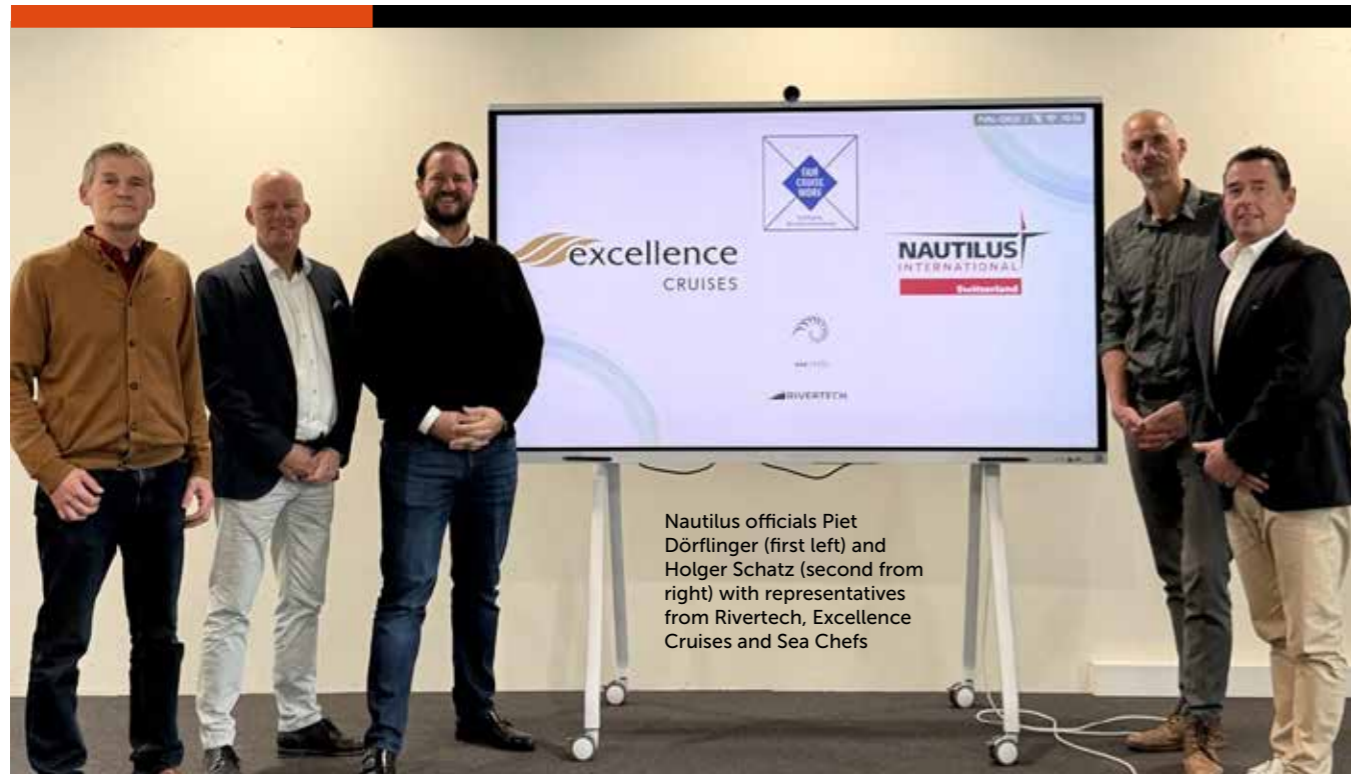
## 20 PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL

**OPINION:** Maritime men's health matters. Recent members forum focussed on men's health ahead of the campaigning month of 'Movember' last October

## 22 INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT WORKERS' FEDERATION

**ASKED TO HANDLE CARGO? JUST SAY NO:** The ITF and employers agreed Non-Seafarers' Work Clause in 2020, which mandates the tasks like lashing and unlashng cargo by qualified dockworkers, not seafarers

Front cover image & credit:  
Laurent Lebreton



Nautilus officials Piet Dörflinger (first left) and Holger Schatz (second from right) with representatives from Rivertech, Excellence Cruises and Sea Chefs

## River cruise crew secure better protection with new CBA

A major breakthrough in employment standards has been achieved in the European river cruise sector through a new collective bargaining agreement (CBA) between Nautilus International and Excellence Cruises.

It also means some Swiss operators will move away from controversial Cypriot employment contracts following sustained pressure from Nautilus International and the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF).

For years, some companies exploited a legal loophole allowing them to establish branches in Cyprus and

employ crew under Cypriot law, where social protections are significantly weaker than in Switzerland or the Netherlands. Notably, Cyprus offers no pension fund – leaving workers without a key benefit.

Since 2020, Nautilus has worked to reverse this practice, negotiating agreements aimed at restoring Swiss employment contracts. While progress was made with several operators, enforcement proved challenging.

The turning point came when Swiss tour operator Excellence Cruises – which relies on Sea Chefs Group for

hospitality staff – stepped in. This led to renewed negotiations with Sea Chefs and the Rivertech Group which is responsible for nautical personnel. By summer 2025, a new CBA was signed for Excellence Cruises' fleet of eight luxury river cruise ships.

The new CBA mandates Swiss employment contracts and enforces minimum standards, including fair wages and social protections. Nautilus Switzerland national secretary Holger Schatz hailed the outcome as a 'significant step toward safeguarding working conditions across the inland waterways sector'.

## Unions demand flag state action on abandonment crisis

Seafarer abandonment has reached its highest level ever, with new figures from the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) revealing a sharp rise in both the number of ships involved and the number of seafarers affected.

According to ITF data, 6,223 seafarers were abandoned across 410 vessels in 2025, marking the worst year ever recorded for abandonment cases. The figures represent a 31% increase in ship abandonments and a 32% rise in abandoned seafarers compared with 2024. 82% of the

vessels were registered with flags of convenience.

This is the sixth consecutive year in which the number of vessels involved in abandonment cases has reached a new high, and the fourth year in a row in which the total number of seafarers abandoned has broken previous records.

The data also shows that abandoned seafarers were owed US\$25.8 million in unpaid wages and entitlements during 2025. The ITF reports that it has so far recovered US\$16.5 million of this sum and

returned it to affected seafarers.

David Heindel, chair of the ITF Seafarers' Section, described the situation as 'nothing short of a disgrace'.

To tackle the issue, the ITF is calling for flag states to be compelled to log a ship's beneficial owner, including contact details, as a pre-condition for registration; national blacklisting of ships to protect seafarers from those with repeated involvement in abandonment cases; and government investigations into the use of flags of convenience.

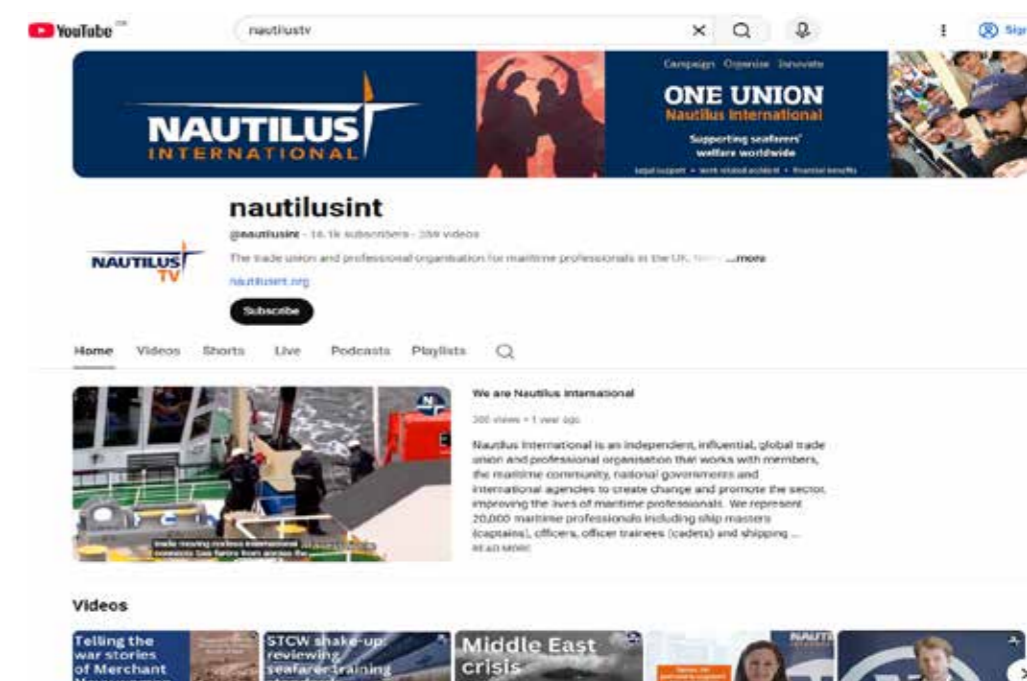
## NautilusTV wins at TUC Comms Awards

Nautilus International has won 'Best Communication from a Smaller Union' at the TUC Trade Union Comms Awards, in recognition of the growing success of NautilusTV, our dedicated YouTube channel.

The judges highlighted the high production quality, variety of content and strong editorial standards, stating: 'The content is easy to follow and most importantly relevant to members.'

Helen Kelly, Nautilus director of communications, campaigns and digital, said: 'As a smaller union, we have to innovate to make our voice heard. NautilusTV shows what's possible when we embrace new ways of organising, informing and engaging.'

Members can explore the growing library of videos at: [youtube.com/@nautilusint](https://youtube.com/@nautilusint)



# MAIB 2025 data shows persistent risk of accidents

**T**he UK Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) has published updated figures for 2025, offering a snapshot of safety trends across the maritime sector.

The data records a total of 1,521 marine occurrences during the year, a marginal increase on the 1,510 in 2024, but still below the 1,586 reported in 2023. While the overall picture suggests relative stability, the detail reveals persistent risks for seafarers and vessels alike.

Merchant vessels accounted for the majority of reported cases. Of the 1,521 occurrences

logged in 2025, 880 involved merchant shipping. Within this category, 596 were classified as marine incidents, with a further 249 deemed less serious. More concerning were 30 serious incidents and five very serious cases, defined by MAIB as involving loss of life, vessel loss or major environmental damage.

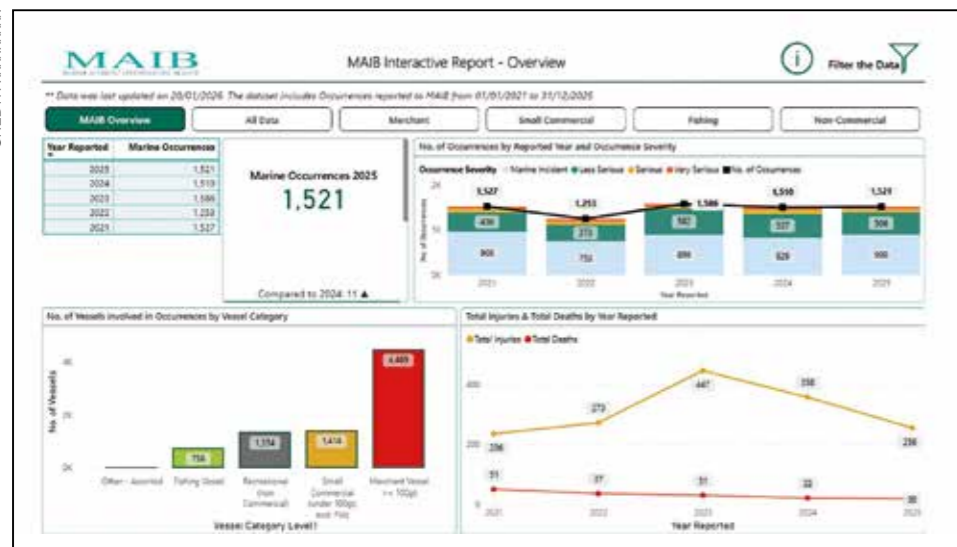
In total, 907 vessels were involved in marine incidents during the year. One vessel sank and eight were abandoned. These events resulted in 111 crew injuries and two fatalities, a stark reminder that even incremental changes in annual figures represent real human consequences.

Large vessels continued to feature prominently. Ships of 3,000 gross tonnes or more were involved in 628 incidents. Mid-sized vessels between 500 and 2,999 GT accounted for 179 incidents, while smaller merchant vessels in the 100-499 GT range were involved in 50 incidents each.

The most common type of incident was damage or loss of equipment, with 376 cases reported. Injuries to personnel followed at 222, ahead of loss of control (81), collisions (67) and contact incidents (64). Although less frequent, groundings, fires, flooding and capsizing were identified as high-risk events due to their potential for catastrophic outcomes.

Injury data varied significantly by vessel type. Passenger ships recorded 100 injuries but no fatalities, the highest injury count across categories. Cargo ships reported fewer injuries, at 31, yet were the only merchant vessel type to record fatalities, with two deaths. Service ships recorded 29 injuries, inland waterway vessels nine, and recreational craft two, with no deaths reported.

The figures highlight the ongoing exposure to risk at sea, and the continued importance of safety culture, training and vigilance across all sectors of the maritime industry.



View the most recent statistics at [gov.uk/government/news/maib-data-portal-winter-2026-update](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/maib-data-portal-winter-2026-update)

# THE GARBAGE MEN OF THE SEA

Have you ever wondered how you, as a seafarer, can help rid the world's oceans of plastic pollution? **Helen Kelly** spoke with Laurent Lebreton of The Ocean Cleanup to find the answers

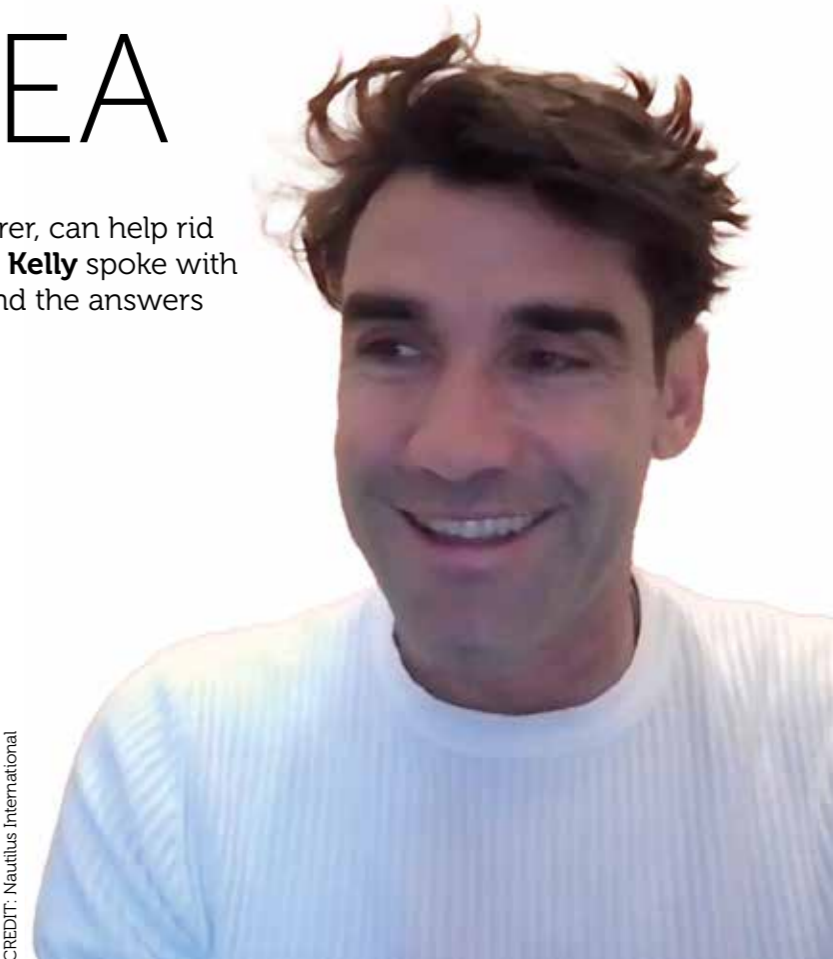
**W**hen you picture the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, you might imagine a vast floating island of rubbish. The reality is far more insidious. Dispersed across 1.6 million square kilometres – an area larger than most countries – approximately 100,000 tonnes of plastic debris drifts in a 'plastic soup' halfway between Hawaii and California. And it's growing.

The Ocean Cleanup, a Netherlands-based nonprofit, is pioneering revolutionary technology to tackle this environmental crisis, and seafarers are playing a crucial role in their mission.

## UNDERSTANDING THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

The Ocean Cleanup's head of research Laurent Lebreton has spent 15 years studying how plastic moves through our oceans. His work combines physical oceanography with cutting-edge modelling to map plastic pollution and design solutions.

'The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is not a floating island,' Mr Lebreton explains. 'If it was, it would be much easier. We could



CREDIT: Nautilus International

**'We always say we want to run out of business. We don't want to be garbage men of the ocean forever'**

**Laurent Lebreton**, head of research at The Ocean Cleanup

go there with a boat and a crane and just pick up everything. But it is dispersed over a very, very wide surface area.'

The patch is one of five subtropical gyres worldwide where ocean currents converge, causing floating matter to accumulate. Fly over it, and you'll see blue ocean. Sail through it, and the disturbing truth becomes apparent: countless fragments of plastic contaminate the water.

There are two metrics used to measure the plastics in the ocean: the number of pieces of plastic and the total mass. 'If you look at the number of pieces of plastic, the majority of these are microplastics – over 90% are tiny fragments. But if you look at the mass, essentially the total mass is carried by

larger objects. So about three quarters of the mass in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is objects several centimetres or even several metres in size,' Mr Lebreton explains.

Much of the larger objects come from the maritime industry: fishing nets, ropes, buoys, crates, and other debris.

### THE TECHNOLOGY BEHIND THE CLEANUP

The Ocean Cleanup's solution is a 2.5km-wide barrier towed by two vessels at just 1.5 knots – half of walking speed. The C-shaped barrier concentrates plastic at its centre into a retention zone, which fills over two to three days before being hauled aboard for processing.

Environmental protection is built into the design. Observers monitor for marine mammals, whilst cameras inside the retention zone detect any trapped animals. Sea turtles, which occasionally wander into the system, can escape through a safety hatch. Marine mammals, Lebreton notes, are 'smart enough to get away.'

Each extraction removes 8-12 tonnes of plastic, though the team knows they can do better. They've paused ocean operations to focus on detecting 'hotspots' – concentrated areas of plastic that could halve cleanup costs and time if targeted effectively.

### THE \$7.5 BILLION QUESTION

The Ocean Cleanup estimates that removing the Great Pacific Garbage Patch entirely would cost approximately \$7.5 billion (£5.9 billion) over 10 years – a figure that may sound astronomical until you consider what we spend on waste management on land, says Mr Lebreton. By improving hotspot detection, he believes they can cut that figure in half.

Until recently, the organisation partnered with Maersk for vessel access. Funding has come primarily from philanthropy, though Mr Lebreton is hopeful that international agreements on plastic pollution could unlock institutional government funding.

'The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is



## 'Data brings knowledge and knowledge makes us closer to a clean ocean'

Laurent Lebreton

in international waters, so it's in no one's jurisdiction at the moment,' he explains. 'It's everyone's problem, but no one's problem.' Yet when the team recover plastic, they can trace brands and markings back to source countries, creating accountability.

### INTERCEPTING PLASTIC AT SOURCE

The Ocean Cleanup operates approximately 20 river interception systems across nine countries, preventing plastic from ever reaching the ocean. Over 90% of plastic from rivers ends up on coastlines.

These river systems serve a dual purpose: removing plastic and gathering intelligence. By analysing what they collect – polymer types, uses, sources – the team provide data that can inform upstream policies and mitigation strategies.

'We take that pollution level and bring visibility to it, and then also report on the type of pollution,' Mr Lebreton says. 'Then upstream mitigation measures can be implemented and eventually we don't need to do our work.'



'We always say we want to run out of business. We don't want to be garbage men of the ocean forever'.

### THE MARITIME INDUSTRY'S ESSENTIAL ROLE

For Laurent Lebreton, who has spent considerable time at sea on research vessels collecting data, the maritime community's involvement is vital to success. The organisation has developed the Automated Debris Imaging System (ADIS) – a small, smart camera using artificial intelligence to automatically detect plastic debris.

These cameras, currently deployed on vessels operated by partners like Hyundai Glovis, continuously collect data as ships traverse the globe. The information helps calibrate numerical models and identify those crucial hotspots.

But there's a challenge: whilst cleanup operations remove plastic, they also generate CO2 emissions. The Ocean Cleanup is watching the maritime industry's decarbonisation efforts closely.

'If we could get decarbonised operations, that would be just ideal,' Mr Lebreton says.

Operating at just 1.5 knots presents unique opportunities for alternative fuels or propulsion systems. 'We don't have the capacity to develop those kinds of things. That's where I'm hoping we can get the industry to come up with solutions and offer us the opportunity to have a carbon-neutral cleanup of the ocean.'



This feature is based on Helen Kelly's video/audio interview with Laurent Lebreton for Nautilus International's **Off Course** podcast, exploring environmental sustainability in the maritime industry and fighting sea blindness. Watch the interview at [youtube.com/@nautilusint](https://www.youtube.com/@nautilusint) or listen on Spotify, Apple Podcast or Soundcloud

## Get involved

Maritime professionals are uniquely positioned to support The Ocean Cleanup's mission. Whether you're a deck officer, engineer, or in any other role aboard ship, you can contribute to the data collection that makes cleanup operations more effective.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- 1 install ADIS cameras on your vessel** – contact The Ocean Cleanup about deploying their automated imaging system to collect continuous data during your voyages
- 2 conduct visual surveys** – download The Ocean Cleanup's mobile application to log plastic sightings during your time at sea
- 3 spread awareness** – share information about ocean plastic pollution with your colleagues and encourage participation in data collection programmes

Visit [theoceancleanup.com](https://theoceancleanup.com) to learn more about these opportunities and connect with the team.

# WHY INVESTIGATIVE FAILURES PUT US ALL AT RISK

Nautilus is shining a light on life-changing injuries sustained by a seafarer while unlashng cargo at the Port of Liverpool – and working with the ITF to find out why no thorough investigation has been conducted by the flag state or UK authorities. **Rob Coston** reports

**L**ashing and unlashng cargo is a dangerous task often carried out by exhausted seafarers, sometimes without pay – and sometimes with tragic consequences.

The consequences were certainly horrifying for one Filipino seafarer, who was asked to perform this duty when his vessel – MV Aurora – called at the Port of Liverpool in January 2024. The vessel, registered in Antigua and Barbuda, was operated by BG Freight Line, a subsidiary of Peel Ports, which also owns and operates the terminal.

An incident occurred when twist locks securing a stack of containers were not fully disengaged before a dockside crane began lifting the top container due to a lack of communication between shore and ship personnel, according to a representative of the flag state from their brief on-scene review and based on the port's draft investigation. As the lift went ahead, the remaining locked corners created a concertina effect, causing the bottom container to swing and crush the seafarer, who was positioned nearby.

Emergency services used specialist inflatable lifting equipment to free the injured crew member before airlifting him to hospital. He suffered a cardiac arrest en route but was resuscitated and survived. However, he was left paralysed from the

waist down and remains unable to work.

At the time of the accident, the seafarer had reportedly finished his previous shift at 06:00hrs and had only four hours' rest on a stormy Irish Sea before being set to work.

## ITF INVOLVEMENT

International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) inspector Matt Parsonage became involved in the case and went to visit the seafarer in hospital. 'He was laid up in his bed, with stitching all down his legs from the surgery,' Mr Parsonage says.

At that stage, the seafarer had been in hospital for six weeks, away from home with no visitors. 'I started taking a statement from him, because no one had taken a statement – which was quite shocking.'

This was the first indication that something was wrong with the investigative process. At this stage Mr Parsonage – in his role as an ITF inspector – was focused on ensuring the best possible outcome for the seafarer. He helped the seafarer to understand his contractual rights, such as the stipulation to maintain regular contact with his employer regarding medical appointments and



ITF inspector  
Matthew  
Parsonage

CREDIT: ITF



Aurora  
sailing from  
Liverpool

CREDIT: IMO

## THE BIG ISSUE

outcomes in order to keep receiving his basic pay after repatriation. He continued to monitor this until all payments were made, as the employer paid late on some occasions and there was confusion regarding currency conversions.

## THE INVESTIGATIONS

A lack of action by authorities quickly became clear. Under the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) Casualty Investigation Code and the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), marine casualties are expected to be

investigated, and the findings must also be made available publicly to promote safety lessons. Yet after months of enquiries by Mr Parsonage and repeated questions from Nautilus general secretary Mark Dickinson to the authorities, it has become clear that neither the port, flag state nor relevant UK authorities have undertaken a comprehensive investigation or published a report into the accident.

'Because this incident happened at the ship-shore interface, it's almost like a grey area, a No Man's Land for responsibility,' Mr Parsonage says. 'Eighteen months on, there is no published official investigation report. No lessons have been shared, and ultimately 'Since the day of the accident,

we've been trying to get answers, but every authority involved has either deflected responsibility or gone silent. We have the flag state for the vessel, Antigua and Barbuda, which is meant to perform an investigation as per the MLC and IMO Code, but they stated in writing that they only did a short on-scene review, liaised with the UK Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB), and communicated with the port operator before deciding that their job was done and a full investigation would not be conducted.

'Meanwhile the port says that they believed that the flag state did the investigation, and they've also claimed to us in writing that their own report is legally privileged, meaning no one is allowed to see it.

'It begs the question of how can you have an official, independent investigation into an incident where someone is nearly killed which is based on a report from the company that operated the vessel and owns the port, and which is legally privileged? How can that happen?'

### FIGHTING FOR ALL SEAFARERS' SAFETY

Both the ITF (via Matt Parsonage) and Nautilus International have been seeking answers and pushing for accountability.

While some members may wonder why a union that represents seafarers from the UK, the Netherlands and Switzerland would get involved in a case that involves a Filipino seafarer working onboard a foreign-flagged vessel, for general secretary Mark Dickinson the reasoning is clear.

'It is important for Nautilus to support the work of the ITF in this – not just because it is clearly the right thing to do, but also because it is important for our members in a practical sense,' he says.

'Tired and overworked seafarers should never be required to carry out work in unsafe conditions. This kind of activity takes place around the world. It is unacceptable. It undermines everyone's safety – including

**'Tired and overworked seafarers should never be required to carry out work in unsafe conditions. This kind of activity in our ports is unacceptable, and undermines everyone's safety'**

Nautilus general secretary Mark Dickinson

The Port of Liverpool



CREDIT: Wikimedia Commons

Container vessels at the port

that of Nautilus members.'

Mr Parsonage sees a pattern of behaviours by flag of convenience feeder container vessels. 'The use of exploited labour on these foreign-flagged ships – who are paid less than trained dockers – means that when something goes wrong, there's less scrutiny, there's less accountability and fewer protections. It's clearly another form of exploitation and undercutting, and absolutely affects UK seafarers who are members of Nautilus. It drives down standards and normalises unsafe practices.'

### MUDDLED RESPONSIBILITY FOR UK INVESTIGATIONS

The ITF and Nautilus have been working hard to find out exactly why the UK investigative bodies have not completed a comprehensive investigation into the incident, so that the facts can be established, and lessons can be learned.

## THE BIG ISSUE

In the UK there are three bodies which have responsibility for investigating accidents in ports or at sea: the Marine Accidents Investigation Branch (MAIB), the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and the Maritime & Coastguard Agency (MCA).

Each of the bodies has a remit to cover certain areas on land and sea and particular types of incidents. The nature of the Aurora incident means that, when questioned, each authority has contended that it is not responsible for conducting a deeper investigation.

For example, the MAIB wrote to inform Mr Dickinson that, 'while the injuries were life changing, they did not constitute a Very Serious Marine Casualty as defined in the IMO's Casualty Investigations Code (CIC) ... Nor did his accident meet the criteria of a Serious Marine Casualty, as defined by MSC-MEPC.3/Circ.3. Consequently, the MAIB was under no obligation either to carry out a mandatory investigation or a formal Preliminary Assessment.'

The ITF followed up with the HSE, which had started an investigation and told Mr Parsonage that he would have to check back in four months. However, to gain

access to the findings, he eventually had to resort to a Freedom of Information request.

In its report, the HSE had considered technical health and safety compliance for lifting operations, e.g. whether the employer had full procedures for working under loads in place, and whether maintenance schedules were in place for the crane. Mr Parsonage describes the report as 'paltry'.

A separate representative at HSE had previously told him on a video meeting that they remembered the discussions over the incident and that it had been mutually decided the MCA would take the lead.

Mr Parsonage had emailed the MCA about the investigation and referred to it with them over the telephone during discussions about the issue of seafarers performing lashing/unlashing of containers (though he did not directly ask about the incident, as at the time he had been told by the seafarer's lawyers that HSE were investigating). However, the Agency claimed to Mr Parsonage that it was unaware of the situation until a Port Welfare Committee meeting in October 2025 – nine months after the incident. This was completely contradictory to the conversations and emails he had had with them. Further, the incident had been raised at an earlier Port Welfare Committee meeting in February 2024.

### JUSTICE MUST PREVAIL

Nautilus and the ITF are continuing to pursue this case, with Mark Dickinson talking to people at the highest level in the three responsible UK bodies. On the international level he has made the ILO aware of the case, and in the UK, he has taken it as high as the maritime minister. A response is awaited from the new MP in that role, Keir Mather.

'We need transparency and we need the buck to stop being passed between flag state, port and UK safety agencies,' Mr Dickinson says. 'And we need reform – an end to the unsafe practice of forcing crew to do lashing and unlashing. This is work for trained and rested dockers not overworked seafarers.'

'Justice must prevail for the injured seafarer, but we must also learn the lessons from this tragedy. That is why we continue to pursue the publication of the investigation reports, as required under the MLC.'

# STILL SLEEPLESS AT SEA

CREDIT: Pexels

Poor sleep is a major challenge to seafarer health

The latest data in a longitudinal maritime health study by SIRC at Cardiff University indicates that seafarer fatigue has reached crisis levels – particularly in the cruise sector. Meanwhile, provision of decent food and access to healthcare remain inadequate. **Andrew Draper** reports

Seafarers have never been more exhausted, according to new research into crew health by the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC) at Cardiff University.

SIRC researchers – Professor Helen Sampson, Iris Acejo, Neil Ellis and Dr Nelson Turgo – have been carrying out a longitudinal study across 14 years, and found in their 2024 research that fatigue had worsened since similar data was collected in 2016 and 2011. This latest instalment of the study involved interviews with 1,240 cargo ship workers and 1,202 cruise sector workers – many of which were carried out in person during port calls.

Prof Sampson said: 'We asked the seafarers why they weren't getting enough sleep.

They reported problems with working hours, work shifts, and anxiety about work, which is particularly an issue in ports.

'I was surprised that problems in the cruise sector are even worse than on cargo ships. However, it isn't the engineers and watch-keeping officers who struggle most, but the hotel, catering and entertainment staff working long hours and split shifts whilst sharing cabins.'

#### TINKERING AROUND THE EDGES

'I've been at SIRC for 25 years, and even when I first joined, there were fatigue studies in the cargo sector. It's a concern which hasn't been addressed properly,' Prof Sampson continues. There have been many efforts 'tinkering around the edges'

to introduce more oversight of work and rest hours, she notes, but this has not made a real difference.

'If there aren't enough people onboard the ship to do the work in a way that allows people to rest properly, then all that happens, as several studies have shown, is that seafarers are forced to falsify their records,' she stresses.

Under UK regulations for shore-based workers, employees are deemed to need 11 hours of rest between work shifts, she points out. 'How much, then, do seafarers need when they're living and working in an environment that moves, where they might be feeling seasick and where there's noise? It would be rational for the rest hours to be greater for seafarers, not less.'

## Considering the noisy, constantly-moving environment seafarers live and work in, it would be rational for their rest hours to be greater than shore workers, not less

Prof Sampson proposes that the Maritime Labour Convention should be amended to enable all seafarers to obtain an unbroken eight-hour period of sleep in any 24-hour period.

#### MISSING OUT ON MEDICAL CARE

Worryingly, the latest report found that, in almost one in five cases, cargo seafarers who had experienced a serious injury or illness at sea had received no medical attention.

Current regulations mean that, if there are more than 100 people onboard a ship, there needs to be a doctor. Cruise ships, for example, have a doctor onboard for the benefit of passengers.

Many ocean-going cargo ships, however, have just 20-25 seafarers onboard. 'So they're not going to reach that threshold and they don't have medically trained personnel on their vessels,' Prof Sampson says.

SIRC is calling for medical personnel onboard cargo vessels. 'It's a relatively marginal cost. Some shipping companies are making large profits, so you could reduce the profit margin slightly without it being catastrophic,' Prof Sampson argues.

Cargo ships are required to have medical chests onboard and an officer in charge with some first aid training. However, the



Watch Andrew Draper's video interview with Professor Helen Sampson on NautilusTV at [youtube.com/@nautilusint](https://youtube.com/@nautilusint)

professor claims these are often totally inadequate for actually dealing with any real trauma, injuries and medical emergencies.

'Crew have no diagnostic skills. Of course, they are supported by telemedical services, but these are hampered by the fact that you usually have to have a seafarer acting as an intermediary, either

with email communication and then going face-to-face with the seafarer concerned, or perhaps with telephone calls and then going off to talk to the seafarer and coming back to the telephone and so on.'

The researchers call for improvements in the protection of seafarers' health onboard by eliminating job-related problems such as vibration white finger and arc eye from welding. They also advocate for enhanced protections against environmental hazards such as sun exposure when working on deck.

Steps should also be taken to address the high levels of stress experienced by senior officers in the cargo sector and senior managers in the cruise sector.

#### ONBOARD CULTURE CONCERNS

The researchers found that the traditional onboard hierarchy, the mix of nationalities and languages, and job insecurity from temporary contracts all combined to create barriers to seafarers reporting medical concerns. 'There's a whole issue of seafarers not wanting to make a fuss and risk losing their job,' Prof Sampson points out.

'We did hear a lot of horror stories that we didn't really look for, but they came. We heard of cases of seafarers who had been misdiagnosed and misunderstood

## In almost one in five cases, cargo ship seafarers who had experienced a serious injury or illness had received no medical attention

onboard. There was one case where a seafarer was thought to have quite common gastrointestinal problems. He clearly had something much more serious. And when he didn't turn up for his watch, they found him dead in his cabin. The seafarers onboard were really traumatised and shocked because they'd all thought that he had something minor wrong with him.'

### DIET SQUEEZE

A low daily food allowance of US\$6-US\$8 per seafarer on cargo vessels – and even less for cruise ships – make it difficult for catering staff to produce interesting and varied menus, the study found. Seafarers reported that food budgets had fallen at a time when food prices had increased, hampering the efforts of catering staff to provide good nutritious food.

Some cargo vessels run out of provisions during long voyages or when facing delays, the researchers learned. Crew members are then served endless amounts of congee, a rice-based gruel.

The study found that cruise ship seafarers had to endure poor quality food that did not meet preferences or needs. Many ate more fried food than at home and some even disliked the provided food so much they brought along their own, like instant noodles. They did get fruit and vegetables, but these were often spoiled and over-ripe leftovers from the passengers.

Cargo seafarers had less access to fresh fruit and vegetables than their cruise counterparts.

### A RAY OF HOPE

One of the few encouraging findings of the SIRC research is that the personal health habits of seafarers in the cargo sector have improved from the 2011 study to the 2016 study to today. Alcohol consumption fell in terms of

### Seafarers' access to health care while working on cruise and cargo vessels

Helen Sampson, Iris Acejo, Neil Ellis and Nelson Turgo



Seafarers International Research Centre  
Cardiff University 2025

Cover page from one of the component studies that make up the SIRC seafarer health research

frequency and amount, and smoking eased. Fried food consumption is also down.

'There's room for improvement. But I think in terms of their own behaviours and their own health awareness, taking multivitamins and things like that, seafarers are really onboard with keeping healthy,' Prof Sampson says. Given all the pressures they face, seafarers are 'remarkably upbeat about their own health'.

● Read the SIRC research at [bit.ly/SIRC\\_health\\_research](https://bit.ly/SIRC_health_research)



The Solent University toolbox comes with animated guidance to help seafarers use the software to record their exposure to harmful situations. This scene shows a 'toolbox talk', which crews are encouraged to have onboard their vessels to remind themselves of the different risks to health and safety

CREDIT: Josh Chappell

# BETTER DATA COLLECTION FOR BETTER HEALTH

Concerns about seafarers' physical and mental health are nothing new, but it's been hard to make successful interventions without the right information. A research project at Solent University aims to fill that data gap with a new 'toolbox' that crew can use onboard ship. **Dr Helen Devereux** reports



According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the leading cause of work-related death among seafarers in 2023 was illness and disease, accounting for 139 premature deaths. Most commonly, these resulted from cardiovascular events and other non-communicable diseases – all conditions often aggravated by the physically demanding nature of the job, prolonged working hours, chronic stress, and limited access to timely medical care while at sea.

Furthermore, there were 26 reported suicides, highlighting the mental health strain faced by many seafarers.

In recent decades there has been considerable focus on the safety of those who work at sea, with various drives such as slips, trips and falls campaigns, but there has been far less consideration of the physical and mental health of seafarers.

This is despite clear evidence across all industries that the incidence of work-related ill-health far exceeds that of injuries. We need to better understand the reason for this, which is why Solent University recently undertook a project to develop a 'toolbox' to collect more comprehensive and consistent data about suspected work-related adverse health events.

### Challenges to collecting health information

One major issue our researchers faced was the absence of an accepted clear definition of work-related ill-health. There can be a confusing overlap between ill-health arising from work and that from other causes that may affect work, or to which work may contribute.

Although there are a number of well-defined occupational diseases (such as occupational asthma), our understanding of current major causes of work-related ill-health, such as mental ill-health and musculoskeletal disease, is more limited, reflecting the complexity both of their aetiology and their association with work.

For example, arguably there are factors related to how seafarers are employed and how their work and workplaces are organised that are beyond the traditional



Find the ILO information about causes of seafarer deaths at [ilostat.ilo.org/blog](https://ilostat.ilo.org/blog)

horizon of those who collect and analyse work-related ill-health data in the industry.

In addition to conventional exposure data, relevant variables might include details such as whether the seafarer is employed on a permanent or voyage contract, the time spent on a particular task, the extent of their autonomy and so on.

There is therefore a need to equip individuals charged with supporting a healthy and safe workforce with the necessary tools to investigate health as well as safety. In the longer-term, detailed analysis of such data will shed more light on the determinants of work-related ill-health among seafarers and so may ultimately lead to positive change in the industry.

### Developing the toolbox

To design the toolbox, we first conducted workshops to understand the experiences of individuals within the UK seafaring industry, including those involved in the collection of health data, such as QHSE superintendents, other relevant stakeholders such as MCA policy leads, and seafarers themselves.

Using this information, we then devised a survey to explore which variables workshop participants felt should (and could) be recorded when ill-health is reported. Our toolbox, therefore, has been produced with direct input from those who will use it.

### Research findings

One of the key findings that emerged from the data collection was the indication that, in general, variables related to psychosocial health risks are not currently being recorded. In addition, many of the participants raised

the issue of fatigue, suggesting that at the moment recording of work/rest hours is insufficient for identifying the role fatigue may play in ill-health.

They wanted to see data including, for example, number of hours worked in the previous three days, length of time onboard, working pattern, and duration of previous work shift.

Similarly, our participants felt that employment type data should be collected, as those with fixed periods of work and leave might be more likely to have sufficient leave time at home to rest.

A second key finding was the indication from participants that it is common for seafarers to withhold health information in order to avoid being declared permanently unfit or restricted on their ENG1. They suggested that this was particularly the case with regard to mental ill-health, and extended to those who do not need an ENG1 to work onboard (e.g. some workers on domestic ferries).

Fear of withdrawal of an ENG1 and/or losing employment onboard, and how this might prevent seafarers from seeking support for mental ill-health, is especially concerning, particularly given that a number of our participants knew of colleagues who had died by suicide in recent years.

### Releasing the toolbox for industry use

The toolbox will be released later this year, along with an animation designed to help those in the industry think about the data collected in their organisation when a seafarer reports ill-health. Alongside data relating to physical risk, such as exposure to hazardous materials, the animation highlights data that may be missing, incomplete or inconsistent, including that related to psychosocial risks, and the organisation of work and employment.

Whilst the toolbox does not purport to solve all the issues regarding seafarer ill-health, we hope the resource can be a starting point for some much needed developments in the industry around data collection, the understanding and prevention of occupational ill-health,

CREDIT: Josh Chappell



From the animated guidance for toolbox users: an example is shown of a potentially harmful environment, where a seafarer is exposed to vehicle fumes on a ferry

CREDIT: Josh Chappell



From the animated guidance for toolbox users: this scene reminds seafarers of the health and safety risks associated with towing

and the design and maintenance of safe and healthy workplaces for seafarers.

● The **Toolbox for recording analysing work-related adverse health outcomes** was developed by Helen Devereux, Eva Makri and David Walters of Warsash Maritime School at Southampton Solent University. Their work was funded by the UK Institution of Occupational Safety and Health. To keep up to date as the project develops and access the outputs, including the toolbox, visit: [bit.ly/Solent\\_toolbox](https://bit.ly/Solent_toolbox)



# BREAKING THE SILENCE ON SHIPPING'S SEXUAL OFFENCES

A groundbreaking study from the University of Winchester has gathered evidence indicating the extent of the maritime industry's problem with onboard sexual assault and harassment. **Amy Field** reports

➤ **N**ew research findings from the University of Winchester are shedding light on the alarming reality of sexual offences experienced by seafarers. Commissioned by the campaigning charity Safer Waves, the research is one of the first to explore the breadth of sexual offences onboard merchant vessels. Dr Genevieve Waterhouse is co-author of the research report, which is titled **Sexual Offences at Sea: Experiences of Victimisation, Witnessing and Reporting**.

She and her University of Winchester colleagues used an anonymous online survey to gather responses from 276 participants, who were recruited with the help of maritime organisations including Nautilus International.

'The key reason for this kind of research is that we just have very little information about what is happening at sea in terms of sexual offences,' Dr Waterhouse says. 'We were really looking to have a broader understanding of what's going on at sea for various types of Merchant Navy seafarers.'

## SEXUAL OFFENCES PREVALENT ONBOARD

The majority of respondents reported either witnessing or experiencing some form of sexual offence. Gender discrimination and sexual harassment were the most reported, but offences such as sexual assault and coercive behaviour were also highlighted. A concerning number of participants – 49 out of 276 – said they had experienced sexual assault in the last five years.

Despite the scale of the issue, the study revealed how the majority of incidents are going unreported. The survey defined 'reporting' broadly, including confiding in a colleague, but still found that most victims and witnesses had told no one.

## REASONS FOR NOT REPORTING

Several barriers to reporting were identified, including limited access to communication channels at sea, fear of being disbelieved or labelled as a troublemaker, and concerns about the impact on their career.

The hierarchical nature of shipboard life often exacerbates the issue, especially if the alleged perpetrator holds a senior position.

'If you're at sea you might not have access to the internet, and even if you do, you might not feel that it's entirely private,' Dr Waterhouse says. 'There can be concerns about the professional outcomes; you might not then get the contracts that they would otherwise expect.'

The study also looked at how cases were handled when reported, revealing low satisfaction across the board. In cases of sexual harassment, 44% said action was taken but this was not satisfactory, while only 33% found the action taken satisfactory. For rape, 36% said the response was unsatisfactory, and 19% said no action was taken at all. Coercive behaviour saw similarly poor outcomes, with a third reporting no further action.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While the findings are important, the authors are clear that this study is just the beginning. The survey recruited participants through open access, using professional networks and social media channels. This

## When participants had reported rape, 36% said the response was unsatisfactory, and 19% said no action was taken at all

self-selection approach allowed seafarers with relevant experiences to participate voluntarily, rather than being randomly chosen.

While the approach helped extract valuable personal accounts, it may have introduced bias, as those affected by sexual offences were more likely to take part. A further challenge was the potential presence of non-human or automated responses, which, despite efforts to screen them out, may have impacted the accuracy of some findings.

## WORKING TOGETHER TO CREATE CHANGE

Although the majority of seafarers are neither perpetrators nor victims, Dr Waterhouse emphasises that creating a safer environment at sea is a shared responsibility. Everyone onboard has a role to play

in fostering a culture of zero tolerance toward inappropriate behaviour, something that must be supported through strong leadership and effective training.

She highlights the role of Safer Waves in advancing this change, as it offers confidential support and legal guidance through trained volunteers with maritime experience. The organisation also delivers targeted training for active bystanders and first responders, helping crew members recognise unacceptable conduct and respond appropriately when incidents occur.

Dr Waterhouse stresses the importance of unions in driving cultural change at sea, by supporting individual victims, publicly

acknowledging the problem and promoting collective responsibility for creating a safer working environment. She argues that unions like Nautilus can help set clear expectations for acceptable behaviour onboard, advocate for zero-tolerance policies, and work with employers to improve training and reporting frameworks.

## SUPPORT FOR NAUTILUS MEMBERS

For members who have experienced harassment or feel unsafe, your first point of contact should be your own union contacts. In urgent situations, members can also access Nautilus 24/7, a round-the-clock helpline providing immediate assistance and support anywhere in the world. Whether you're at sea or ashore, help is always available when you need it.

● Read the full research report at [www.saferwaves.org/reports](http://www.saferwaves.org/reports)



Watch Amy Field's video interview with Dr Genevieve Waterhouse on NautilusTV at [www.youtube.com/@nautilusint](http://www.youtube.com/@nautilusint)

## OPINION

# Maritime men's health matters



Head of professional and technical  
David Appleton  
protech@nautilusint.org

A recent meeting of Nautilus members focussed on men's health in the maritime industry.

Shipping remains a predominantly male profession, yet subjects such as prostate and testicular cancer, and the particular mental health challenges faced by men, are still too rarely discussed. Across the world, a man is believed to attempt suicide every minute – with some research suggesting that seafarers may be particularly susceptible due to the pressures of working away from home and family.

The meeting began with an overview of the Movember movement, explaining how a light-hearted idea of growing a moustache for charity in November two decades ago has grown into a global campaign supporting men's physical and mental wellbeing.

Many of the Movember-funded projects are built around activity and shared experience, recognising that men often find it easier to open up while performing an activity alongside others rather than in direct conversation.

Members were asked to consider what might work in the maritime context to encourage openness and raise awareness of men's health issues. Their reflections were thoughtful and grounded in real-life experience.

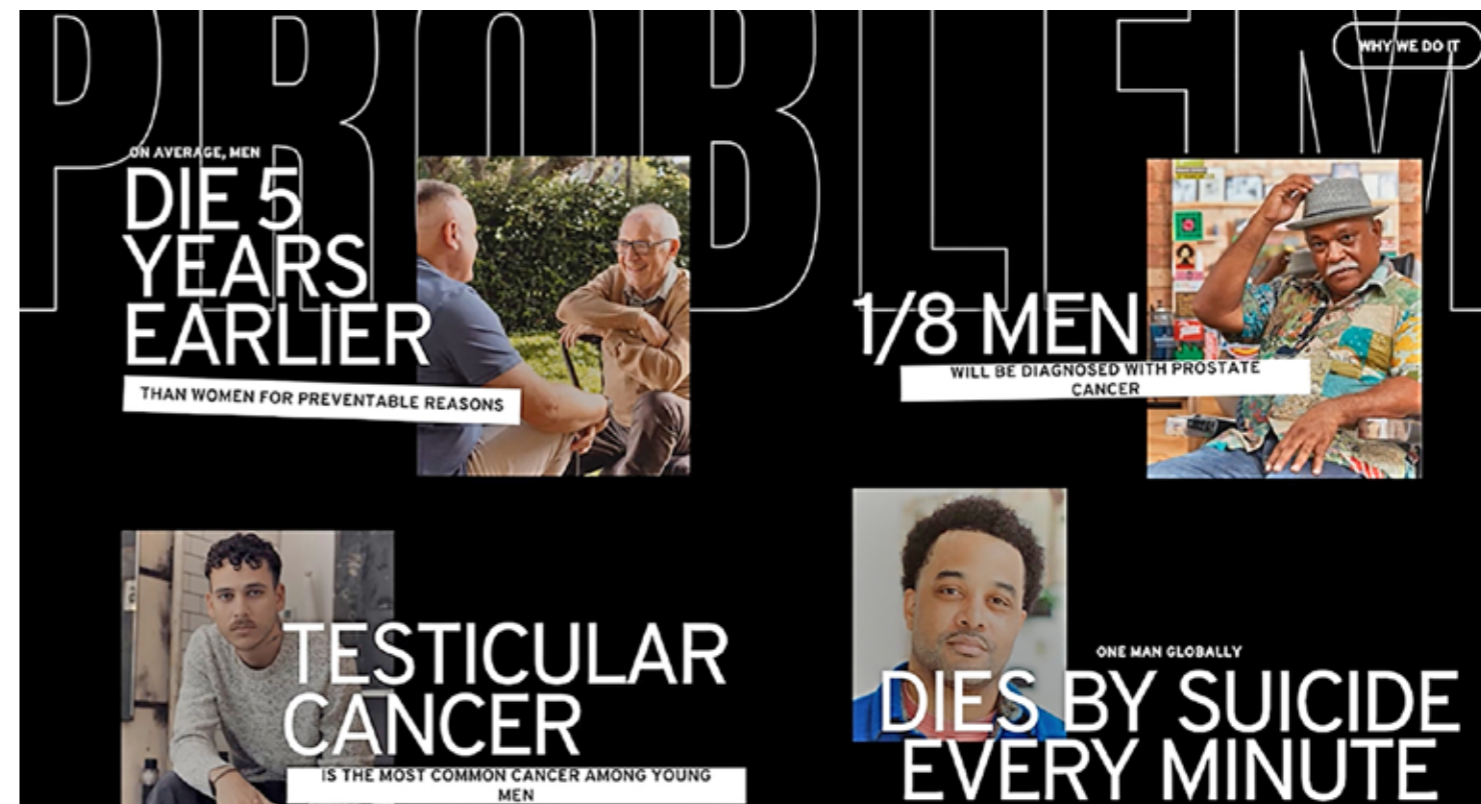
## MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Several members spoke about how valuable it is simply to have the chance to talk. One recalled joining a new ship shortly after a relationship breakup and finding the isolation difficult to manage. Access to counselling through an employer's medical insurance later in his career had proved extremely beneficial.

Others stressed the importance of being ready to listen when a colleague raises concerns about their mental health. One member noted that when he finally opened up to a friend, it led to a mutual exchange that helped them both.

Structured men's groups were viewed positively, providing a setting where people can speak freely among others with shared experiences. A few participants had received training on how to check in with colleagues, though there was a common view that many employers express commitment to mental health without putting adequate measures into practice. Some training programmes were also felt to be ill-suited to the hierarchical environment onboard.

Nautilus will continue to encourage employers to strengthen their approach and will look into possibilities such as online discussion groups for seafarers.



Statistics about men's health from the Movember organisation helped to start the discussion

## ADDICTIVE BEHAVIOUR

The forum also touched on the rise of online gambling and cryptocurrency trading at sea. These habits can escalate quickly and have a serious effect on mental health. There was a discussion on how companies could take a more proactive role, for example by including it in their internet use policies, but a balance would need to be struck to ensure that access was not unnecessarily restricted.

## PROSTATE CANCER

Prostate cancer mainly affects men over 50, or over 40 for those of black or African heritage, and often develops without symptoms in the early stages. Members shared personal experiences that highlighted the importance of early testing and diagnosis, as timely treatment can make a crucial difference.

Those unable to access free tests through national health services can obtain private screening, and seafarers are encouraged to arrange checks when ashore. After it was suggested that screening could be incorporated into the ENG1 medical process, we agreed that Nautilus would investigate

ways in which awareness and access could be improved for seafarers.

## PATERNITY LEAVE

Members shared their experiences with paternity leave policies and noted large discrepancies between the conditions on offer in different companies. Some pointed out that in many companies, the policies are informal, with employers offering flexibility where possible but with no guarantees.

We also heard that many UK companies only paid the statutory paternity pay rate of £187 per week, which could mean that taking paternity leave would be financially prohibitive for some seafarers.

## KEEPING THE CONVERSATION GOING

The meeting showed how ready maritime professionals are to talk about health when given the chance. From mental wellbeing and addiction to medical awareness and academic pressures, members were generous in sharing their experiences.

Discussions like these are essential to improving the culture of health and support across our industry.



T.

Read about the devastating incident on MV Aurora on pages 8-11

CREDIT: ITF

# Asked to handle cargo? Just say no!

The ITF and employers agreed the groundbreaking Non-Seafarers' Work Clause in 2020, which mandates that tasks like lashing and unlashng cargo should be performed by trained and qualified dockworkers, not by seafarers. Yet every year seafarers are killed or seriously injured carrying out lashing duties for which they are not trained. The ITF wants all seafarers to know that they can refuse this dangerous work

## WHY IS THIS WORK DANGEROUS?

Seafarers are often seen performing lashing and unlashng work, without the proper training and often unpaid. In addition, they are sometimes asked to do it alone, which puts them at further risk of injury, whereas dockworkers should always work in pairs. Also, local lashers and their employers always carry out a vessel safety inspection first to make sure the workplace is safe to work in.

## WHAT RIGHTS DO I HAVE?

You have the right to refuse lashing and other unsafe work if it puts you in danger.

Vessels covered by an ITF-approved

collective agreement must comply with the 'non-seafarers work' clause. This states that crew shall not be required or induced to carry out cargo handling. Ordering you to handle cargo violates the agreement.

The clause also acknowledges that cargo handling is specialised and potentially dangerous work that should be done by trained dockers. It stipulates that shipowners must use trained dockers to do this work wherever they are available. It stipulates that if dockers are unavailable, seafarers can only handle cargo if

they agree to do it, are trained for it, and are specifically paid for it.

You can check if your vessel is covered by an ITF Agreement using the Look Up section on the ITF Seafarers' website ([itfseafarers.org](http://itfseafarers.org)), or download the free **ITF Seafarers' app**. If your vessel is covered and you or someone in your crew is asked to handle cargo, the ITF advises you to refuse. If the shipowner still insists that you do the work, please contact the ITF Seafarers' Support team at [seafsupport@itf.org.uk](mailto:seafsupport@itf.org.uk) and your own trade union.

# the global SEAFARER



Tel: +44 (0)20 8989 6677

[www.nautilusfederation.org](http://www.nautilusfederation.org)